



Centre for Research on Peace
and Development (CRPD)

Timing and Sequencing in Post-Conflict Elections

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CRPD Working Paper No. 26

2015

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Abstract

The centrality of elections to post-conflict peacebuilding has exposed numerous issues of timing and sequencing. One is the relationship between the electoral process and the new political order. Should elections precede the writing of a new Constitution, so as to confer democratic legitimacy on that process via a widely-representative constituent assembly, as in Nepal? Or should they take place only once the rules of the game are clearly established, as many Arab Spring reformers, fearful of the likely consequences of Islamist parties gaining power, argued? Similarly, should local elections be held before national ones, as a first step towards democracy, or should national elections be given precedence, to help foster nationwide political parties? These are not abstract questions in post-conflict environments, where elections are often held prematurely in response to both local and international pressures. This short-term bias leads to several recurring pathologies, with questions of longer-term governability too often overlooked in favour of short-term demands. A striking example of this problem is the recent proliferation of post-election power sharing deals to resolve disputed elections, as in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and most recently Afghanistan, which entrench political divisions into the Constitution through the creation of dual-executive systems which are inefficient but expedient. Political compromise therefore comes at the cost of cohesive governance.

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This working paper is a draft version of the chapter 'Timing and Sequencing in Post-Conflict Elections' in the book *Building Sustainable Peace: Timing and Sequencing of Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Peacebuilding*, edited by Arnim Langer and Graham K. Brown, Oxford University Press 2016.

The 'Building Sustainable Peace' project was made possible by a generous grant of Flanders Department of Foreign Affairs.

1. Introduction¹

Elections are an integral element of contemporary post-conflict peacebuilding. As a palpable manifestation of democracy, it is rare indeed that a civil war or other violent dispute over the state is today resolved without some recourse to the electoral process. Indeed, contemporary international norms seem to consider no other avenues for conferring legitimacy and authority on a new government. While elections may at times have been oversold as a potential conflict-management device, they still remain central in practice to international interventions for post-conflict peacebuilding.

The centrality of elections to post-conflict peacebuilding has exposed numerous issues of timing and sequencing. One is the relationship between the electoral process and a new political order. Should elections precede the writing of a new constitution, so as to confer democratic legitimacy on that process via a widely-representative constituent assembly, as was the case in Nepal? Or should they take place only once the rules of the game are clearly established, as argued by Arab Spring reformers, fearful of the likely consequences of Islamist parties gaining power?

These are not abstract questions. In Nepal, successive attempts to agree on a new constitution have been stymied precisely because the electoral process has been unable to deliver a workable and cooperative legislative majority. In Egypt, liberal groups who worried that elections held before a new constitution was in place would lead to the dominance of the Muslim Brotherhood were proved correct—resulting in a 2013 military coup and the return of the generals to power once again.

Domestic and international politicians and policymakers must also confront the issue of how soon to hold elections in the post-conflict period, particularly when international ‘boots on the ground’ are involved. As successful elections often form part of an ‘exit strategy’ for international interventions, post-conflict elections often take place within an excessively short-term time frame, reflecting a desire on the part of international actors to disengage from their commitments and demonstrate success to domestic publics (Caplan 2012). The timing of the November 1996 elections in Bosnia, for instance, were dictated less by events on the ground

¹ This paper draws on some of my previous writings, including ‘Understanding Elections in Conflict Situations’ in Gillies 2011, and ‘Post-war Elections: Uncertain Turning Points of Transition’ in Jarstad and Sisk 2008.

but rather the Clinton administration's need to show progress in the Balkans in time for mid-term elections in the United States.

More diffuse temporal concerns also encourage premature elections. Democracy, as the mantra goes, is a long-term process, but the domestic political pressures that weigh on the states that usually oversee and implement these missions are almost all short-term. Quick results are required. An early establishment of home-grown institutions, such as representative legislatures and multi-ethnic peace and security forces, is needed to create both the shell of a state and a legitimate body politic for the international community to deal with. Financial pressures push many electoral assistance missions to scale-back their immediate presence and reduce the levels of their assistance as soon as it is minimally feasible to do so (see Lyons 2005).

All of this places considerable pressure on the post-conflict election timetable, and frequently leads to elections being held as early as possible in the life of a peacekeeping mission in order to create some kind of legitimate government—a pressure which in Iraq led to elections being held in 2005, in the absence of popular security and in the face of a boycott from one of the country's main ethnic groups, the Sunni. Such 'premature elections' are today actually the norm rather than the exception. The time between a conflict ending and an election has been cut in half since the end of the Cold War: prior to 1989, an average of 5.6 years passed before post-conflict countries held their first election; since 1989, this has fallen to 2.7 years (Brancati and Snyder 2013: 823).

This short-term bias leads to several recurring pathologies: premature post-conflict elections leave insufficient time for democratic forces to emerge, making it more likely that elections are fought out by nationalist or ethnic parties than by policy-driven ones; undue weight is typically accorded to administrative ease in the choice of electoral systems, with potentially debilitating consequences; inclusion and descriptive representation are privileged over other goals such as competitiveness and accountability; and questions of longer-term governability are too often overlooked. A striking example of this final problem is the recent proliferation of post-election power sharing deals to resolve disputed elections. An example is the 2008 deal in Kenya to resolve the political, economic, and humanitarian crisis that erupted after incumbent Mwai Kibaki was declared president over his opponent, Raila Odinga (who eventually became prime minister). After the eruption of ethnopolitical violence across the country a dual-executive system which allowed both men a share in power was enshrined. Similar arrangements in Zimbabwe in 2009 and more recently in the Central African Republic were also makeshift solutions to post-election impasses.

The evidence of recent years is that hasty and poorly-run elections in post-conflict environments are more likely to lead to these kinds of political fixes when election outcomes become the subject of dispute—as they almost invariably do in countries with weak institutions and social mistrust. By entrenching political divisions into the constitution (e.g. through the creation of dual-executive systems), such approaches privilege face-saving fixes to post-election disputes over longer-term governability. A clear example was the 2014 pact in Afghanistan between the top vote-getter, Ashraf Ghani, who became president, and Abdullah Abdullah, named as chief executive, following a deeply-compromised election which featured fraud on both sides. Political compromise in such cases comes at the cost of cohesive governance.

Nonetheless, elections remain as central to post-conflict peacebuilding as ever, with both domestic elites and international norms typically pushing for quick elections as part of any peace deal (Brancati and Snyder 2011). Domestically, political actors tend to make judgements about the wisdom of early elections based on their perceived prospects and balance of power. For donors, elections provide a tangible sign of progress, while emerging international norms favouring negotiated settlements and localization of authority in the period following a conflict have also contributed to this trend.

Particularly in high-profile international interventions, elections remain symbolically important, signaling to both domestic and international audiences that the cloak of legitimate government authority has been restored—an essential step in the process of state reconstruction. By enshrining a political order centred on rule-based competition for office rather than open warfare, elections in post-conflict settings can channel the expression of societal conflicts within the boundaries of a democratic political system rather than through armed violence. For all of these reasons, elections are today considered a central part of the process of post-conflict peacebuilding.

There are also powerful normative arguments for elections as instruments of democratization. Despite widespread disenchantment with ‘exporting democracy’ in the wake of the Iraq and Afghanistan interventions, non-democratic avenues carry little normative appeal or legitimacy. Indeed, Iraq and Afghanistan are only the latest in a long line of international interventions stretching back at least as far as the United Nations operation in Cambodia in 1993 in which elections have been assigned a dual role in both transitions *to* democracy and *from* violent conflict.

But precisely because they are often saddled with multiple and incompatible objectives, there has been a considerable variation in the success of post-conflict elections in meeting these twin goals (Kumar 1998). Post-conflict elections are expected to bring an end to armed violence while also mobilising and expressing societal cleavages. Particularly in ethnically-divided societies, these goals are frequently at odds. Similarly, there is a tension between the massive international support lavished upon transitional elections by the United Nations and other international actors, which often builds up the capacity of election administrations to unsustainable levels, and the reality that successful elections have at times been used by the international community to avoid the commitments involved in longer-term statebuilding (Reilly 2008, 2011a).

However, there is some evidence of changing approaches and sequential learning over time by both international and domestic actors. Internationally, the ‘exit strategy’ model of rushed elections that prevailed in the 1990s in cases such as Cambodia, Haiti, and Liberia has been mollified. Domestically, local elites have become more vocal and demanding influences on issues such as election timing, administration, and institutional design. And there has also been progress in the scholarly understanding of some issues, such as the best ways of sequencing local and national-level elections. Nonetheless, debilitating problems of both strategy and execution continue, making elections an increasingly problematic area of post-conflict assistance.

2. Election Timing and Sequencing

How soon to hold an election following a period of violent conflict is a recurring dilemma of any international intervention. Because they play such important substantive and symbolic roles, there is nearly always pressure to conduct elections as soon as possible following a period of violent conflict. At the same time, it is increasingly accepted in policy circles that early elections held in highly polarized environments tend to expose deep social cleavages which can make the process of post-conflict peacebuilding more difficult. Indeed, in some cases, free and fair elections can actually undermine rather than reinforce the development of the post-conflict democratic order.

A case in point is Cambodia’s transitional 1993 elections conducted by the United Nations Transitional Administration in Cambodia (UNTAC). The UNTAC operation, which began in 1992, was at the time the largest and most ambitious peacekeeping and democratization mission the United Nations had ever undertaken. After running a technically near-faultless election, the realities of power politics were exposed in the immediate post-election period,

once it became clear that the incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen's party had gained fewer seats than the opposition, leaving no party with a working majority. Amid threats of renewed civil war, a hastily-brokered deal saw a power sharing coalition featuring 'co-prime ministers' from the two parties installed—an arrangement which proved highly unstable in practice and fell apart completely in 1997, when Hun Sen routed his opponents to claim power alone. But by then UNTAC had long-since departed, declaring the peaceful holding of elections themselves proof of the success of the mission, despite leaving Cambodia a deeply defective quasi-democracy. Hun Sen remains in power to this day.

This model was to set the stage for subsequent internationally-sponsored elections throughout the 1990s. In some cases, such as Bosnia and Kosovo, international forces did not depart following the initial elections, but rather installed themselves as a kind of ongoing quasi-administration. But in most interventions outside Europe, the 'minimal security, quick elections, and departure' model was prevalent. This necessitated holding elections relatively early in the post-conflict cycle, giving both domestic and international actors a political and symbolic marker of progress that could be used as the justification to begin turning power over to local forces.

Domestic actors also contributed to this pattern. In Iraq, for instance, the rationale to hold quick elections after the US-led invasion of 2002 was both substantive (the need for a Constituent Assembly to draft a new constitution) and symbolic (to demonstrate the validity of the prevailing US policy of transforming Iraq into a bastion of democracy in the Middle East). But significant domestic pressure from local elites such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for national polls to be conducted as quickly as possible was also present. This led to elections being held in early 2005 in the absence of popular security and in the face of a boycott from one of Iraq's main ethnic groups, the Sunni—a decision which arguably hindered rather than helped the longer-term process of democratization. A similar combination of local and international pressures was evident in East Timor, where UN administrator Sergio Vierra de Mello was under constant pressure from local elites associated with Fretilin, the party of the resistance struggle, to hold elections before other parties could organize to challenge it.²

Despite such pressures for early elections, comparative experience suggests that in most cases the application of elections immediately following a conflict is fraught with problems, with the partial exception of those accompanied by highly-intrusive peacekeeping missions

² For more on the role of local elites in post-conflict democratization, see Berdal and Zaum 2013, and Zürcher et al. 2013.

which essentially take over the state (Fortna 2008). One common outcome is a *de facto* contest between former warring armies masquerading as political parties. This can hamper the development of peacetime politics in deeply-divided societies even years after the war has ended—as demonstrated by the regular re-election of ethnic hard-liners in Bosnia, where nationalist parties and elites have not only prospered, but sought to use the democratic process to press for sectarian objectives.

So when should post-conflict elections be held? Ideally, an extended process of consultation and local-level peacebuilding, in which some of the real interests and concerns that provoked the conflict are addressed in a step-by-step fashion *before* national elections are held, may offer better prospects for a peaceful transition in post-conflict societies. In practice, however, most countries do not have the luxury of such an extended period of international tutelage. I have previously suggested that a period of two or three years between the end of a conflict and the holding of elections should be seen as a minimum, based on the examples of both Kosovo and East Timor, where a multi-year period of transitional administration took place before founding election were held (Reilly 2008). This timeline has received support from a recent study of post-conflict elections, which found that elections held in the first year following a cessation of hostilities drastically shortens the time till conflict relapse, as do elections held in the second year. It was not until three years after conflict cessation that elections ceased to impact on conflict recurrence (Flores and Nooruddin 2012).

Economists have taken a different approach to this issue, asking ‘When can a donor successfully exit from an on-the-ground presence in a post-conflict state?’ The answer, based on how soon conflict states can expect to fund their recurrent budgets from tax revenue rather than international donor support, is: not for a very long time. Looking at cases of international involvement in Liberia, Mozambique, Solomon Islands, and East Timor, one study found that even the best-case scenario for successful exit requires an international engagement lasting between fifteen to twenty-seven years. Extended donor engagement, it appears, is essential for the creation, sustenance, and maturation of resilient institutions that are able to undergird the state and prevent it from rolling back into renewed failure upon donor exit (Chand and Coffman 2008).

Such open-ended commitment, however, is unrealistic for the vast majority of post-conflict states (Ponzio 2011). Indeed, pressure to hold elections quickly after peace has been restored is likely to remain a recurring theme of international interventions. This is in part due to the symbolic reasons discussed earlier: as the ‘signalling’ role of elections is particularly important for the news media and other Western policy consumers, the mere holding of elections is

usually taken as an indicator of political progress. However, flawed elections can have the reverse effect, as in the 2009 presidential elections in Afghanistan (where major electoral fraud by Hamid Karzai was effectively ignored by the international community, precipitating serious divisions within the UN agencies responsible). At the same time, the substantive value of providing international actors with a legitimate local counterpart remains central, as these are the actors to whom authority is handed, and with whom the details of the new political order are negotiated.

A separate but related sequencing issue is the coordination of national and sub-national elections. Some scholars argue that in a new democracy, holding national elections before regional ones generates incentives for the creation of national, rather than regional, political parties—and hence that the ideal process of election timing is to start at the national level before holding regional or local polls (Linz and Stepan 1996: 98–107). Others believe that simultaneous national and local elections are the best option, as they ‘can facilitate the mutual dependence of regional and national leaders. The more posts that are filled at the regional and local level [...] the greater the incentive for regional politicians to coordinate their election activities by developing an integrated party system’ (Diamond 1999: 158). This was the approach used at Indonesia’s transitional 1999 elections following the collapse of the Suharto regime, with identical party-list ballots being presented to voters at simultaneous elections for national, provincial, and local assemblies in a calculated (and largely successful) effort to strengthen the nascent party system (Reilly 2006). In sum, simultaneous local and national elections may hold more appeal than a staggered approach.

In practice, however, several prominent transitions have chosen to start with municipal elections before national ones, using local elections as a trial run in the hope of privileging service delivery above fraught disputes over history or identity (Paris 2004). In Kosovo, for instance, local elections held soon after the conflict ended (in 2000, less than one year after the war) helped weaken the political power of the party associated with the Kosovo Liberation Army while strengthening moderates in Ibrahim Rugova’s Democratic League of Kosovo. Elsewhere, local consultation processes preceding national elections, such as the World Bank’s Community Empowerment and Local Governance project in East Timor in 2000, moved the political focus onto more nuts-and-bolts issues of development. The 2010 local elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo, by contrast, had little positive impact on the highly-flawed presidential elections conducted the following year. And the very act of holding subnational elections before national ones may also strengthen separatist parties with territorial bases, as occurred prior to the breakup of Yugoslavia (Brancati 2009).

3. The Choice of Electoral Systems

Timing and sequencing issues are also relevant for the choice of electoral system, one of the most important institutional decisions that any post-conflict democracy (and indeed any democracy) has to make. Electoral systems have a direct impact on issues such as the development of the party system, linkages between citizens and their leaders, political accountability, representation, and responsiveness. As a result, they have long-term consequences for the operation and consolidation of democratic governance, making the choice of electoral system one of the most important political decisions taken in the immediate post-war period.

An electoral system is designed to do three main jobs. First, it determines how votes cast are translated into seats won in a legislature, presidency, or other representative body. Second, electoral systems act as the conduit through which the people can hold their elected representatives accountable, allowing more direct or more distant channels of accountability based on their design. Third, different electoral systems give incentives for those competing for power to couch their appeals to the electorate in distinct ways. In post-conflict societies, for example, where language, religion, or ethnicity may represent a fundamental political cleavage, particular electoral systems can reward candidates and parties who act in a co-operative, accommodatory manner to rival groups; or they can punish these candidates and instead reward those who appeal only to their own group (Reynolds et al. 2005).

One of the great political science debates of recent years has concerned which electoral systems are most appropriate for promoting peaceful politics in divided societies. Two schools of thought predominate. The scholarly orthodoxy has long argued that some form of proportional representation (PR) is all but essential if democracy is to survive the travails of deep-rooted divisions. The tendency of PR to produce multi-party systems and hence multi-party parliaments, in which all significant segments of the population can be represented, is seen as especially important in promoting consensual or 'consociational' post-conflict politics (Lijphart 1995). By contrast, an alternative approach argues for electoral systems which work to break down the political salience of social divisions rather than foster their representation. Drawing on theories of bargaining and cooperation, such 'centripetal' approaches emphasize the need for cross-ethnic incentives and broad-based parties (Horowitz 1985; Reilly 2011b). One way to do this is to use 'distribution systems,' such as that employed for presidential elections in Indonesia, Nigeria, and Kenya, or vote-pooling electoral models such as the alternative vote (as in Papua New Guinea) or the single transferable vote (as in Northern Ireland).

In contrast to these domestic reform initiatives, elections conducted under UN auspices have almost all favoured PR, usually in its simplest closed-list, large-district form. Major transitional elections in Namibia (1989), Nicaragua (1990), Cambodia (1993), South Africa (1994), Mozambique (1994), Liberia (1997), Bosnia (1996), Kosovo (2001), East Timor (2001), Iraq (2005), and Burundi (2005) were all conducted under party-list PR, often with the entire country forming a single-electoral district. This has strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, such systems can play an important role in ensuring the voices of minorities and marginal groups can be heard and their genuine power enhanced. On the other, they place few restrictions on chauvinist or ethnic parties, including those which are thinly-veiled versions of former warring armies.

Timing and sequencing issues are again important here. In practice, the adoption of large-district PR in post-conflict countries has often been dictated more by administrative convenience under time pressure, such as the wish to avoid demarcating individual electoral districts and producing separate ballot papers for each district, than by deeper concerns about political development. In many post-conflict environments, national PR offers the only feasible way to hold elections quickly, as a uniform national ballot can be used and no electoral districts need be demarcated, simplifying the process of voter registration, vote counting and the calculation of results. In Liberia in 1997, for example, population displacement and the lack of accurate census data led to the abandonment of the old system of single-member majoritarian constituencies in favour of PR with a single national constituency (Lyons 1998: 182).

However, list PR systems also have some real disadvantages. They provide little or no geographic link between voters and their representatives, and thus create difficulties in terms of political accountability and responsiveness between elected politicians and the electorate. Many new democracies—particularly those in agrarian societies (Barkan 1995)—have much higher demands for constituency service at the local level than they do for representation of all shades of ideological opinion in the legislature. In addition, PR systems such as those used in Iraq and Liberia, where the whole country was effectively one constituency, tend to reward political fragmentation, encouraging fractionalization rather than aggregation.

As one recent survey noted, nationwide PR is ‘the most permissive system [...] politicians can join small parties, establish new ones, or split an existing one, safe in the knowledge that even a small percentage of the votes will bring some seats in the legislative assembly. For the same reason, voters feel safe to vote for such parties, and their votes make the minimal success of small parties a sort of self-fulfilling expectation’ (Taagepera and Qvortrup 2011: 252). The

result is often a fragmentation of existing parties and a multiplication of smaller ones, creating real problems for post-conflict governance.

I have therefore previously argued that PR systems at transitional elections should be modified to encourage a higher degree of geographic and personal *accountability*—such as by having members of parliament represent territorially-defined districts, or by allowing voters to choose between candidates not just parties (Reilly 2013a). A popular choice in many transitional democracies in recent years has been for ‘mixed’ systems, in which part of the legislature is elected on a national level by PR, and part from single-member districts, so that both proportionality and accountability are present to some degree. But this also has a problematic record—it was the system used for the 2006 elections for the Palestinian National Authority (which was intended to favour the incumbent Fatah party but led to a Hamas victory), and the same year in the Democratic Republic of Congo (which resulted in a highly fragmented parliament), and also to elect Nepal’s 2008 Constituent Assembly (which also proved unworkable). The judicial annulment of the 2012 Egyptian election was also a result, in part, of the mixed system chosen.

One implication from this is for policymakers to consider using different systems for first-time post-conflict elections and subsequent ones. For example, the administrative and inclusionary benefits of large-scale PR for first-time elections might be tempered at later elections by a move towards more multifaceted systems which allow a great range of voter choice. This could include not just systems which give greater local or regional representation, but also those which ask voters to express preferences between candidates, as these have been shown to increase voter trust by promoting a greater sense of fairness about election outcomes (Reilly 2001, Farrell and McAllister 2004). For questions of timing and sequencing, the key message is that electoral systems appropriate in the immediate aftermath of a conflict may not be those best suited to subsequent democratic consolidation (see Reilly and Reynolds 1999).

3.1 Issues of Election Administration

Elections are a unique area of public governance, being large-scale national events that require substantial state capacity, fundamental rights of speech and association, rule of law, and sufficient infrastructure and security to allow all adult citizens to participate. Of course, these are precisely the facilitating conditions which tend to be lacking in post-conflict countries. As a result, post-conflict elections require different models of election administration to those used in peaceful and developed democracies. These models vary widely. Some countries locate responsibility for the administration of elections within a government portfolio like the

interior or home affairs ministry. In other cases, the body responsible for running elections is created anew for each electoral event; in others, the international community itself takes responsibility for running the elections.

In post-conflict environments, it is critically important that elections are run not by the government of the day but by some form of independent electoral commission. Comparative experience, including several global studies of electoral management bodies (López-Pintor 2000; IDEA 2006), leave little doubt that independent and permanent electoral management bodies represent a clear best practice in terms of electoral administration. Their perceived neutrality from political interference lends credibility and integrity to the electoral process—a crucial determinant of a successful election. As such, establishing an independent electoral commission should be one of the first steps in a transitional electoral timetable. However, issues of timing and sequencing impact here too: elections held under scheduling pressures are more likely to be conducted by ad-hoc or temporary bodies than by a well-resourced, permanent electoral management body.

Conflict-zone elections also affect the *composition* of electoral management bodies. In some countries, electoral commission are comprised not of apolitical electoral officials, but of judges, confusing the separation of powers. In others, they are formed by the political parties contesting the elections themselves. Problems with these models in some important recent transitional elections (e.g. the 1999 elections in Indonesia, and the failed 2011–12 elections in Egypt) as well as established democracies (e.g. the 2000 elections in the United States) have highlighted their propensity for politicization and deadlock, further underlining the importance of careful composition of electoral management bodies.

The comparative evidence, then, suggests that independent commissions run by non-partisan civil servants are definitely to be preferred. Party-based commissions have an almost inevitable tendency to split along party lines. In Haiti, for example, the Provisional Electoral Council was made up of representatives of the political parties and hence deeply divided along party lines, with internal mistrust and divisions preventing efficient administration (Nelson 1998: 76). In Cambodia, by contrast, a non-partisan electoral commission was widely seen as one of the outstanding elements of the entire UN mission. Non-partisan commissions were also a prominent and successful aspect of UN missions in Namibia and in East Timor.

Another perennial issue for post-conflict election administration is how to handle internally displaced people and refugees. Because electoral districts and polling places are typically drawn and allocated on the basis of voter registration records, post-conflict elections are often

constrained by the availability of basic demographic data. Problems of population displacement and the lack of accurate census data also work in favour of a proportional system with a single national constituency, as such systems do not tie voters to specific electoral districts. This was the system used at South Africa's first post-apartheid elections in 1993, in part because of doubts about the reliability of population data, but which has undermined the development of South African democracy ever since.

One solution to this problem is to abandon the idea of an electoral roll altogether, a strategy followed by several of the transitional elections discussed in this paper. Alternately, countries moving towards a first election (or first in a long time) typically need to conduct a national census before elections can be held. For instance, as part of its extended political transition Myanmar held a (widely-criticized) national census in 2014, its first for several decades, in preparation for planned 2015 elections. This revealed major population changes between regions (not to mention major administrative problems with the census itself), including strongly-contested recalculations of the relative population shares of some ethnic states—a recurring issue in population surveys of ethnically-diverse states, with politically-fraught consequences (Horowitz 1985).

Such issues further complicate questions of election timing and sequencing. They also constrain the choice of electoral system, creating a circular process of cause and effect. Most electoral models require accurate demographic data and population registers, but these are often absent in post-conflict settings. As discussed earlier, post-conflict societies ideally need local representatives who can focus on service delivery—but the most viable electoral models compatible with the flawed demographic data common in post-conflict settings, such as national party-list PR, provide little or no ties between a member and a geographic area. Post-conflict elections are thus often stuck between the longer-term needs of political development and the short-term demands of a minimally-acceptable electoral process. Invariably, the short term prevails.

4. Conclusion

Issues of election timing, sequencing, and coordination exert fundamental pressures on post-conflict peacebuilding—including on the likelihood of conflict recurrence, as the various academic studies cited in this paper make clear. But timing and sequencing also impact on many other elements of the electoral process. Fundamental issues of election administration, the choice of electoral system, and the development of political parties are all influenced by the demands and pressures inherent in the attenuated timetables that typify post-war

reconstruction efforts. Similarly, the timing of the first post-conflict elections—specifically, whether to hold these elections quickly or postpone them into the future—the sequencing of local, regional, and national elections, and the coordination of these elections with the choice of a new constitution, all impact directly upon prospects of a viable post-conflict democracy emerging.

One issue I have discussed elsewhere and which bears repeating in this context is the relationship between repeated elections and post-conflict governance. Some scholars such as Lindberg (2009) have argued for the idea of ‘democratization by elections,’ in which even flawed and partially competitive elections can, when iterated, nonetheless lead to greater democratization even under unpropitious circumstances. However, in relation to some of the most high-profile cases of post-conflict elections of the past decade such as Iraq and Afghanistan, it could be argued that repeated elections have actually had the opposite effect, with flawed or fraudulent electoral processes contributing to political stalemate, institutional decay and a growing crisis of governance (Reilly 2013b).

Even credible elections can be problematic if disconnected from broader questions of governability. Consider, for example, the ongoing constitutional reform process in Nepal. Since 2006, following the collapse of the country’s monarchy and a drawn-out but low-level civil war between Maoist rebels and a discredited government, Nepal has been trying to enact a new constitution. The United Nations and other international donors have supported Nepal’s constitutional reform process in the hope that it will produce a stable democratic system in what is a very poor, mountainous, and diverse post-conflict country. A key achievement was the election in 2008 and again in 2013 of a Constituent Assembly representing the full diversity of Nepalese society, in contrast to the closed, elite-dominated politics of the past.

However, this protracted and highly inclusive electoral process (in which considerations of religion, ethnicity, language, and gender were all central) has made actually reaching agreement on a new constitution exceptionally difficult, while highlighting the competing agendas of elected members and international donors. Political stalemate within the Assembly has been a constant problem. The country was without a Prime Minister for most of 2010, and at the time of writing remains without a final constitution. In May 2012, Nepal’s Constituent Assembly ended its tenure, for the third time, without having completed even a first draft of the Constitution.

Bosnia has tread a similar path. As noted above, the Clinton administration insisted on elections barely a year after the end of hostilities in 1995, and regular elections have become

a seemingly every-present element of Bosnia's extenuated peace process. But the combination of elections and ethnic power sharing has been to entrench the original fault lines of the Balkan conflict into Bosnian politics. Today, twenty years since the war ended, three presidents—one for each ethnic group, Bosniak, Croat, and Serb—continue to serve on a rotating basis. Thirteen ministers oversee Bosnia's segregated educational framework that teach three different versions of the country's history. The country remains a prisoner of its divided past (see Bayrasli 2014).

Other cases are more promising. Indonesia's experience of sequenced elections and constitutional reform over the past decade is worth examining. Forsaking the chicken-and-egg question which so bedevilled other democratising states in the Islamic world of whether elections or a new constitution should come before the other, in 1999 Indonesia (the world's largest Muslim country) held its first free elections for almost fifty years. A gradual and piecemeal series of smaller changes followed after each election, leaving the original 1945 Constitution amended but intact. After opening up elections to new parties with clear national support (including the former ruling parties from the Suharto years) in 1999, a series of stepwise reforms saw the removal of the one-quarter of parliamentary seats reserved for the military, the decentralization of the system of government and, in 2004, direct presidential elections. By the time of the 2014 election, a much more democratic constitutional model had emerged incrementally. One secret to Indonesia's emergence as the Muslim world's foremost democracy was thus that major constitutional changes were dealt with sequentially, by elected representatives, rather than by one big-bang reform (Horowitz 2013).

The Indonesian case lends hope to those attempting to make similar transitions elsewhere. But the broader dilemmas of post-conflict elections are not easy to solve. While enormous international resources continue to be spent organising, assisting, and monitoring elections around the world, elections themselves cannot build state capacity or ensure enlightened leadership. Indeed, competitive elections by their nature tend to highlight social cleavages and emphasize areas of difference rather than commonality, and can actually make the basic tasks of government more rather than less difficult, particularly in transitional states where conflict recurrence is always possible. Scholars have shown just how crucial issues of timing and sequencing are to the likelihood of such events. It is now up to policymakers to grasp seriously these lessons in future cases of post-conflict electoral peacebuilding.

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